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Trump Administration Proposes Downlisting of Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Under Endangered Species Act

FORT BENNING, Georgia – Secretary of the Interior David L. Bernhardt, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and Fort Benning Garrison Commander, Col. Matthew Scalia, were joined by public and private representatives today to celebrate the proposed downlisting of the red-cockaded woodpecker from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In the Southeast, no fewer than eight Army installations, four Air Force installations and one Marine Corps installation all made commitments to recovery goals for red-cockaded woodpeckers, which is a cardinal-sized bird, 8 to 9 inches in height with a sharp beak, living on land they manage. Fort Benning performed years of crucial conservation work to recover the woodpecker.

In 1998, Fort Benning reported a red-cockaded woodpecker population of 153 potential breeding groups. Their recovery goal was having 351 breeding groups, which has been exceeded with an estimated 412 breeding groups currently in population. The Army's efforts, in addition to significant commitments from public and private landowners, contributed to the best available science indicating woodpecker populations being stable and increasing with adequate protections in place for its continued recovery.

"Partnering for conservation has improved the condition of the red-cockaded woodpecker. It also allows us to take this important downlisting step. The Trump Administration continues to engage public and private interests in conserving our most imperiled species through efficient, commonsense regulation that facilitates cooperation and on the ground results rather than conflict," **said Secretary Bernhardt.**

"Sometimes it seems once an animal gets on the Endangered Species list, you never see them come off – that is why it is so important to highlight a success story like this one," **said**

Secretary Perdue. “President Trump has made it clear through regulatory actions that our government should promote conservation but not overly burden the American people. The partnership between the USDA Forest Service, Department of the Interior, the Department of Defense, and private landowners is a good news story and is proof this strategy works.”

“This action validates the success of Fort Benning’s ongoing sustainability efforts,” **said Col. Matthew Scalia.** “It demonstrates our commitment to conserve natural resources and illustrates what we can achieve by working together with federal, state, non-profit and community partners. It is a testament that military and conservation goals are compatible. Fort Benning will continue to support the successful recovery and growth of red-cockaded woodpecker populations.”

“President Trump and Secretary Bernhardt continue to deliver on the commitment of improved conservation, and we never could have reached this important milestone without the cooperation and dedication of the [Department of Defense](#) and other federal agencies,” **said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Aurelia Skipwith.** “While recovery is the ultimate measure of success of the Endangered Species Act, thanks to innovative conservation efforts and a deep commitment by diverse partners across its range, we are one step closer to that goal today for the red-cockaded woodpecker.”

Once abundant from New Jersey to Florida, west to Texas and north to Missouri, the red-cockaded woodpecker’s range had dwindled to just a handful of states by the 1960s, following more than a century of habitat loss. In the late 1970s, there was an all-time low of an estimated 1,470 clusters of red-cockaded woodpeckers. A breeding pair of red-cockaded woodpeckers is joined by “helpers,” usually the males from previous broods that assist with incubation and feeding of the next generation. Today, the Service estimates nearly 7,800 clusters are ranging across 11 states from southern Virginia to eastern Texas.

[Hurricanes](#) also impact the bird’s habitat as in 1989, [Hurricane Hugo](#) destroyed 87 percent of the active cavity trees in South Carolina’s Francis Marion National Forest, the second-largest red-cockaded woodpecker population at the time. That storm, however, kick-started the woodpecker’s recovery. Two revolutionary programs developed in the storm’s wake are credited with saving the woodpecker. Artificial cavities were drilled into tall pines, and boxes, or “inserts,” were installed, providing woodpeckers with new homes. Additionally, the [translocation](#) of juvenile woodpeckers to forests with few birds began.

A variety of programs, including voluntary [Safe Harbor Agreements](#), allow landowners who guarantee a baseline population of woodpeckers to manage their land with minimal regulatory oversight. These agreements encourage activities such as prescribed fire and the restoration of longleaf pine forests with healthy understories of grasses and a mix of old and young trees.

For the past decade, the U.S. Forest Service, in partnership with more than 30 public and private organizations, has focused on bringing back the woodpeckers’ preferred habitat, longleaf pine forests, through such projects as the [America’s Longleaf Restoration Initiative](#) and the [Million Acre Challenge](#). More than 1.3 million acres of new longleaf pine stands have been established

and many hundreds of cavity inserts have been installed in these younger longleaf landscapes to help the red-cockaded woodpecker's resurgence.

Although the proposed downlisting represents a milestone for the woodpecker, conservation efforts underway may eventually warrant removing the red-cockaded woodpecker from the endangered species list altogether. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking input from the public on delisting the species. Since conducting the status assessment for the woodpecker, the Service has heard from more than two dozen partners who have been actively conserving habitat for the bird's recovery. Those partners have committed to continuing their conservation activities in the future.

The Service is also proposing a special rule for the woodpecker under section 4(d) of the ESA that will tailor protections needed for the bird's recovery. The rule would prohibit incidental take associated with actions that would result in the further loss or degradation of woodpecker habitat. This includes impacts to cavity trees, actions that would harass red-cockaded woodpeckers during the breeding season and the use of insecticides near clusters, which are groups of cavity trees used by a group of woodpeckers for nesting and roosting. For additional details on 4(d) prohibitions and exceptions, our FAQs are posted [online](#).

The proposal to change the status of the red-cockaded woodpecker from endangered to threatened will be published in the *Federal Register*, opening a 60-day public comment period. The proposed rule and supporting documents, including the species status assessment report and references cited, are available online at <http://www.regulations.gov> under Docket No. FWS-R4-ES-2019-0018.

Background on Trump Administration's ESA Improvements and Accomplishments

No administration in history has recovered more imperiled species in their first term than the Trump Administration. Since 2017, 13 species have fully recovered, no longer being listed under the Endangered Species Act's List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife, and another six species have been downlisted from endangered to threatened. To provide context for this in looking at other administrations in their first term, the Obama Administration recovered six species; the Bush Administration recovered eight species; the Clinton Administration recovered nine species.

Fish and wildlife conservation depends on federal partnerships with states, landowners, and most importantly sportsmen who directly fund – to the tune of [\\$1 billion last year](#) alone and more than \$23 billion since inception – conservation efforts by purchasing hunting and fishing licenses, fishing tackle, ammunition, boating fuel and other recreational items.

To support stronger on-the-ground conservation efforts, encourage private actions to benefit our most imperiled species and provide greater legal certainty for ESA determinations, the Service updated its ESA regulations in 2019 to improve the implementation of the law. The regulations hadn't been comprehensively updated since the ESA passed some 40 years ago. The Service's guidepost for the multi-year, public process was President Trump's overarching effort to reduce regulatory burden without sacrificing protections for the environment and wildlife.

What Partners Are Saying:

“Private forest owners are proud partners in this conservation milestone, and we have contributed to the long-term health of the red-cockaded woodpecker. Private forest owners are an essential part of conservation success – 360 million acres of working forests across the country are privately owned. The National Alliance of Forest Owners companies have proudly worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and conservation partners to develop and implement smart management decisions and conservation agreements that support a wide range of wildlife across the country.”

— **Dave Tenny, President and CEO, National Alliance of Forest Owners**

“Today, the Forest Landowners Association commends the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for moving the red-cockaded woodpecker to threatened status. This success has been decades in the making and is a direct result of imaginative, far-reaching, and heroic efforts of private landowners working with the Service to yield significant results for red-cockaded woodpecker habitat and populations. This action marks a major step toward recovery – a step that never would have been possible without the commitment, investment, and partnership of private forest landowners across the Southeast. Today’s action will pave the way for the new opportunities for voluntary and collaborative conservation, and we look forward to continuing to conserve the red-cockaded woodpecker and other forest-dependent species with our partners at the Service and across the wildlife conservation community.”

— **Scott Jones, CEO, Forest Landowners Association**

“Weyerhaeuser, with more than 120 years of expertise in sustainable forestry, is proud to be part of the successful conservation story of the red-cockaded woodpecker. The company has a long, proven history of protecting the species, exemplified by our current red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor Agreement. We congratulate the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, agencies, organizations, and private forest landowners who worked together to create and conserve the habitat needed for this unique southern pine-associated woodpecker. The red-cockaded woodpecker is a notable example of how the public and private sectors can work together to conserve a challenging at-risk species. Weyerhaeuser remains committed to the conservation of wildlife habitat on working forests and looks forward to continued collaboration with the Service.”

— **Weyerhaeuser Company**

"Since 1973 the Trust for Public Land has been working to preserve land. We are pleased to have been able to work with local, state and federal partner agencies to conserve habitat that aided the recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker."

— **George Dusenbury, Southern Hub Director, The Trust for Public Land**

“We are proud to be partners with the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, and The Nature Conservancy to protect over 20,000 acres of needed habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers. The number of red-cockaded woodpeckers has more than doubled in Arkansas since their reestablishment on new Natural Areas, Wildlife Management Areas and Nature

Preserves. Collaborations like these, using tools like prescribed fire, provide the awesome habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers in Arkansas.”

— **Joe Fox, State Forester, Arkansas Forestry Commission**

“We have long believed that ‘conservation is a team sport,’ and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources is proud to have supported the red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor program since its inception in 1998. Working in partnership with over 180 volunteer landowners, the South Carolina Safe Harbor program comprises over 350,000 acres containing over 400 red-cockaded woodpecker breeding groups. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources currently manages and monitors 109 active breeding groups across 11 different department properties, and we are confident that continued proactive stewardship and land management by dedicated landowners will ensure red-cockaded woodpeckers can thrive in South Carolina.”

— **Robert Boyles, Director, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources**

“Since 1969, Texas A&M Forest Service has been monitoring red-cockaded woodpecker groups and managing cluster and foraging habitat on two of our state forests – the W.G. Jones State Forest and the I.D. Fairchild State Forest. We have also partnered with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in implementing the East Texas red-cockaded woodpecker Safe Harbor program since 1999, enlisting more than 50 private landowner tracts totaling over a million acres into this voluntary program. Texas A&M Forest Service is committed to continue managing this species following U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidelines and the latest scientific methods.”

— **Carter Smith, Executive Director, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department**

“Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield is gratified to have contributed to efforts leading to the downlisting of the red-cockaded woodpecker. We could not have achieved our red-cockaded woodpecker recovery goal without the local support of U.S. Army Garrison Fort Stewart leadership, the Directorate of Training, Plans, and Mobilization, the Forestry Branch, and overarching support from Army Environmental Command, Installation Management Command, and our highly effective partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Fort Stewart harbors the second-largest (and growing) population of red-cockaded woodpeckers, and we are committed to continuing our conservation efforts toward the recovery of the species across the region, along with numerous other rare species associated with Fort Stewart longleaf pine ecosystems.”

— **Larry Carlile, Wildlife Biologist, Fort Stewart/Hunter Army Airfield**

“With 579 active red-cockaded woodpecker clusters on four ranger districts, the national forests in Mississippi have had great success improving habitat for this endangered species. Populations continue to grow annually. Active forest management, with an emphasis on prescribed burning, thinning, and mid-story control, has played a key role in our success while also providing habitat for a variety of other non-game and game species. Support from private, state, and federal partners has been integral in our efforts to restore and improve habitat for the long-term sustainability of this species.”

— **Carl Petrick, Forest Supervisor Mississippi, U.S. Forest Service**

“The Francis Marion and Sumter national forests worked more than 41 years with South Carolina county, state and federal partners to reintroduce the red-cockaded woodpecker. Numerous volunteers have also contributed to the overall outcome. The Francis Marion National Forest's red-cockaded woodpecker population was nearly wiped out following Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Now, there are over 512 red-cockaded woodpecker colonies after the development and installation of artificial cavities in remaining longleaf pine trees, as well as extensive management for the longleaf ecosystem over the past 30 years. The Sumter National Forest had no red-cockaded woodpecker activity for over 40 years, until a lone male was spotted in 2017. We later successfully paired that male and the Long Cane Ranger District brought in more pairs the last two years. We will continue monitoring and maintaining the red-cockaded woodpecker populations as needed.”

— **Rick Lint, South Carolina Forest Supervisor, U.S. Forest Service**

“The red-cockaded woodpecker has been a keystone in our agency’s threatened and endangered species efforts. Supporting its recovery and long leaf pine habitat has been a prime example of what partnerships can achieve. We are proud to continue to work with other government and private organizations to promote the conservation of this species.”

— **Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources**

“The Florida Forest Service has worked diligently to assist with the recovery efforts of the red-cockaded woodpecker. We’ve worked to both increase the population of the species on Florida’s state forests and to demonstrate that effective, multi-use forest management provides healthy forests and healthy populations of wildlife. We manage five state forests and one ranch with red-cockaded woodpecker colonies, and all have recovered to much healthier, sustainable levels than when recovery efforts first began. This includes the Blackwater River State Forest with one of the largest state-managed red-cockaded woodpecker populations in the range. I am very proud of the work our staff is doing to promote the recovery of this iconic species as we continue to manage Florida’s public and private forestlands well into the future.”

— **Erin Albury, State Forester and Director, Florida Forest Service**

“The public/private partnership operating at Moro Big Pine Conservation Area is a model of successful species conservation. Management practices have focused on creating and maintaining preferred open fire-maintained pine flatwoods habitat through forest thinning of over 13,000 acres and use of prescribed fire on over 50,000 acres. Over 100 cavity inserts have been installed during the last decade to create ideal roost and nesting sites. This active forest management has resulted in tremendous population growth – we started with 24 adult red-cockaded woodpeckers with 9 breeding pairs and now have 64 adults with 26 breeding pairs. In addition to habitat management we have worked cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to permit translocation of red-cockaded woodpeckers to the conservation area that were scattered in non-viable settings. Moro Big Pine Conservation Area is managed in partnership with Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, Arkansas Game and Fish and The Nature Conservancy. These conservation agencies and organization jointly hold a conservation easement on the property.”

— **Moro Big Pine Conservation Area, National Association of Forest Owners**

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